



Coalition Military Assistance Training Team engineer Capt. Emil Rebik, structures craftsman Tech. Sgt. Ron Boulanger and an Iraqi contractor use survey equipment to check the grade for potential renovations to 1930s-era buildings. The buildings were constructed by the British at Camp Habbaniyah, an Iraqi base in the Al Anbar Province.

Resurrecting **Hope** at Camp Habbaniyah

Joint training team builds respect, relationships with Iraqi army

story and photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Under the cover of darkness, Army CH-47 helicopters sliced through the hot, humid air over western Iraq. Twelve Airmen and three Sailors were on board, traveling up the Euphrates River over some of the most dangerous terrain in the Al Anbar Province.

The Coalition Military Assistance Training Team had spent the previous 11 weeks preparing for what lay ahead. Unable to talk over the piercing shrill of dual-prop engines, they sat silently, trying to imagine what it would be like to train, advise and live with 4,000 Iraqi soldiers for the next six months.

Stomachs suddenly shifted as the Chinooks banked hard-left and swooped down to land with a cushioned bump. A Marine crew chief hit a lever, throwing open a cargo door, and barked, "Habbaniyah!"

Welcome to Camp Habbaniyah

The team grappled for their gear and turned to exit the door, the scene before them bleak. There were no aerial porters to usher them off, no welcoming party, no runway lights — not even a glow stick. Just the hard cement tarmac, a blanket of stars, and the hot, smelly waft of aircraft fuel.

“We were just standing there in pitch-black darkness, watching the helicopters disappear in the night, wondering, ‘Is this where we’re supposed to be?,” said Lt. Col. Sharyn McWhorter, commander of the Habbaniyah transition team. “All we had was our [paperwork] and personal locator beacons.”

Alerted by the sound of helicopters, a caravan of eager U.S. Army Soldiers rolled to the blacked-out airfield to greet the team who would serve as their replacements.

The team had arrived to their new home, Camp Habbaniyah in Iraq.

Under an Army “Request for Forces,” this first Air Force-led team of 55 personnel — 35 of whom are Soldiers, Sailors and Marines — was tasked with mentoring, advising, training and equipping the Iraqi Army’s 1st and 7th Divisions.

“We came in with training that offered a rudimentary knowledge of Arabic culture and language,” said the colonel deployed from Barksdale Air Force Base, La. “Our goal is to establish sustaining processes for the Iraqi army so that they find solutions to their problems.”

Located 55 miles west of Baghdad, Camp Habbaniyah is nestled between Fallujah and Ramadi on the Euphrates River. The once resort-like base, occupied by the British Royal Air Forces from the late 1930s to 1959, boasted lush landscaping, a golf course, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, 73 tennis courts and an indoor/outdoor theater.

Today, the dusty base is a ghost of its former self. Due to years of neglect, the landscaping is overgrown, and the buildings and base facilities have been ransacked by thieves, and hit by small arms fire and mortar attacks. Now controlled by the democratic government of Iraq, the installation has been earmarked as a major logistics hub and basic training recruiting center for Iraqi forces.

Providing stability

Engineer Capt. Emil Rebik and structures craftsman Tech. Sgt. Ron Boulanger have helped the Iraqi Army refurbish a base that they can, one day, be proud of. In their six-month deployment, they have personally overseen the renovation of 10 buildings used as classrooms and living quarters. These actions contributed to the roughly \$120 million spent on base infrastructure upgrades over the last two years of coalition forces’ presence.

But it hasn’t been easy. Theft and vandalism rears its head nearly every day. One building nearing completion had been stripped of its electrical wiring three times by thieves who harvest the copper wire and sell it for profit to anyone interested. To date, nearly 2,000 pounds of stolen copper — a highly valued component in roadside bombs — has been seized by base authorities.

“Because many Iraqis have gone for so long without the quality of life that they deserve, they have this ‘grab it while you can’ mentality,” the colonel said. “Unfortunately, they don’t realize when they steal something that they’re delaying the improvement of this base — which will eventually improve stability in this community.”

Defensor Fortis

Training several hundred Iraqi “Jundi” — Arabic for soldiers — to provide a protective bubble around the base that continually battles exploding car bombs, sniper fire, rampant theft and



Tech. Sgt. John Thompson provides guidance for Iraqi officers (clockwise from above) during a weapons qualification at Camp Habbaniyah, Iraq. Master Sgt. Mark Muna, Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Franklin Weaver and Army Maj. David Garcia train Iraqi medical technicians on the operation of an electrocardiograph that monitors heart rate and blood pressure. Tech. Sgt. Rob Nusbaum observes an Iraqi sergeant teaching how to distinguish between north, west and northwest headings. Well planned verbal instruction is key to successfully teaching Iraqi soldiers — “Jundi” — who often are unable to read or write.



An Iraqi general provides motivation to a group of hospital technicians (top) at Camp Habbaniyah, Iraq, while also stressing the importance of taking pride in wearing the uniform. Power production specialists Senior Airman Timothy Rentmeister and Airman 1st Class Francisco Garcia train Iraqi Sergeant Major Ahmed how to set up a water distribution system. Each day, 4,500 liters of water is purified from the Euphrates River for use at Camp Habbaniyah.

vandalism has been the mission of an eight-man base defense unit, headed by Captains Jim Hughes and Mike Nedrow.

“Prior to our arrival, they would tackle a task in a very impromptu manner,” Captain Hughes said.

The Texas-based security forces officer estimates one-third to one-half of the Jundi cannot read or write. Fortunately, the lack of education doesn’t impede their ability to recognize genuine concern and commitment when they see it.

Tech. Sgt. Rob Nusbaum monitors a class on orienteering — compass and map reading — a class he feels is desperately needed.

“Sometimes we’ll get a call from guards in one of the towers saying, ‘We see explosions outside the perimeter.’ So we’ll ask, ‘What directions are the explosions coming from?’ And they’ll say, ‘In front of us!’”

The class is taught by an Iraqi “Areef” — Arabic for sergeant — to a dozen Jundi who guard the perimeter of the base.

“This guy’s an outstanding instructor,” said the sergeant deployed from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz.

As team leader, Captain Hughes beams with pride when he talks about the successes his team has had in training Iraqi sol-



diers. He attributes the milestones made to the “establishment of solid working relationships” with his Iraqi counterparts.

“They eagerly listen to our advice and attempt to emulate our actions,” the Colorado native said. “After teaching and mentoring them on how an operation should work, they now establish objectives, develop a plan, organize and then brief the operation — leaps and bounds above their previous actions.”

Feeding the force

At the entrance of a newly constructed dining facility, nearly

Master Sgt. Mark Muna and Navy Medical Corpsman Michael Mahoney take a break while training Iraqi bakers on how to conduct proper public health inspections in a bakery. Sweet smells of fresh “samoon” — traditional Iraqi bread — fill an old-world style bakery where each day, 2,500 pounds of flour, salt, water and yeast are mixed and kneaded into diamond-like shapes and baked to meet the ration of two pieces per “Jundi,” or soldier.



100 Jundi squat on the ground in five straight columns. Several Areefs, sporting bright red berets, bark out commands, signaling the next column to eat. A water buffalo nearby is surrounded by a dozen Jundi wetting their heads, faces and hands under several open spigots.

Inside, Tech. Sgt. Doug Altrichter, food services advisor, is charged with ensuring more than 500 Jundi get the right types and portions of food three times a day. He also oversees and mentors the Iraqi food service workers, raising awareness about facility cleanliness.

“There are three things that make an Iraqi meal successful — rice, “samoon” [traditional Iraqi bread] and chai tea,” said the Minnesota Air National Guardsman. “If you serve a meal with these three ingredients, they’re very happy.”

During his six-month tenure at the base, Sergeant Altrichter has come to accept and appreciate the cultural differences the Iraqis have in the way they eat, socialize and live.

“Occasionally, you’ll see three or four guys eating off the same tray of food or drinking from the same cup. The medical guys on the team were up in arms about it, but I had to remind them to accept the differences,” he said. “Getting to know the Iraqis as human beings and having them say that Iraqi soldiers and American soldiers are brothers — I’ll never forget that.”

Becoming a sister

Like the other members of her team, Colonel McWhorter knew she would have to adapt to cultural differences. But not until she talked to her predecessor did she realize the Iraqis would have to adapt to her gender.

“I was going to be the first female senior adviser to the base commander,” she said. “The Iraqis were very cautious at first. I knew, coming into a society that doesn’t place a lot of emphasis on the role of females in strategic thinking, that it was going to be about relationship building.”

So she did just that. “I knew that what they had to see from my team, every single day, is that we give 100 percent to their army,” the colonel said. “When they started seeing that we were working for them and with them, it was very easy for them to trust me.”

But that trust didn’t come without some hesitation. In the

beginning, the Iraqis made comments about the past, when they couldn’t work with a female, or said things like “if my wife knew I was talking to you right now, she’d be upset,” the colonel said.

“However, they have called me their sister, which means a lot to me,” she said.

And it means a lot in Arabic culture. The colonel takes that bond seriously.

One time, an Iraqi officer approached her in a dining facility and questioned her loyalties to the Iraqi army.

“Why do you care so much about this army?” he asked. “They’re not your soldiers. They’re not your Jundi.”

She replied, “I care because I would want an officer to care about my soldiers — and, we’re a team. That’s why the Americans are here, to help the Iraqis better their army.”

New attitudes

When South African contractor Stuart Hain began working on the base 18 months ago, sprightly, vocal formations of Jundi did not exist.

“You’d never see them marching in groups, and their overall demeanor was more guarded — even defiant toward foreigners,” he said.

Now that has changed. With arms swinging wildly and feet stomping hard in unison down a dusty road that cuts through a stand of 40-foot date palms and overgrown eucalyptus trees, a tight formation of Jundi belt out what is probably the equivalent of a “Jody.” To the untrained Western ear, it sounds more like the Beach Boys rendition of “Barbara Ann” being played backward — but there is no mistaking their enthusiasm and pride.

Add to that, the novelty of an American audience — particularly the novelty of a red-headed, blue-eyed female watching the formation pass by — and the vocals become louder and chests stick out farther. The new recruits, necks craning sideways to eye the curious onlooker, smile and offer a nod with a



thumbs up as the formation ambles down the road.

Mission success

Despite the numerous challenges, the team is making enormous strides. Part of this is due to the number of skill sets on the team.

“We have two of the finest power production troops, the youngest two Airmen in theater doing this mission,” Colonel McWhorter said.

The Airmen coached the life support contractors and generator mechanics on the proper oil to use in generators, developed preventative maintenance schedules — which never existed before — and have also been instrumental in keeping the water purification system up and running.

“Preventative maintenance is something that hasn’t been done before,” the colonel said. “The Iraqis don’t think in terms of long-term planning and mitigating problems with the equipment. They’re realizing that with preventative maintenance, things can last a lot longer.”

And the Iraqis are realizing the potential of their own forces. The colonel had a conversation with an Iraqi officer who had recently returned home from “ejaza” — Arabic for vacation. While he was home, he told his family and neighbors all about the Americans at Habbaniyah.

Lt. Col. Sharyn McWhorter shares a light moment with a group of “Jundi” — Iraqi soldiers — who kid her about her age, writing “forty something” in the sand, which she jokingly replaces with a 21. A young Jundi (left) gives a thumbs up to a passerby as he marches back to his living quarters.

“He told them that not all Americans are here helping to fight; some are here to build,” she said. “He told them how much better his base is now because of what we’re doing.”

The gentleman went on to say that when the colonel’s team first arrived, his officers didn’t want to work hard.

“They saw us every day, giving so much for the new Iraqi Army that they were inspired to be better officers,” she said. “They want to work hard now, because they see how much can get accomplished when we all work as a team for a common goal.”

And for the colonel, it was music to her ears. “I was almost in tears because that was *our* goal — work hard for the Iraqis to ‘plant the seed’,” she said. “We can pack up now, knowing that we did our part. At some point in time, this base will be able to stand up and the Iraqi army will be able to sustain itself.” 🦋

Staff Sgt. Francesca Popp contributed to this story